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ABSTRACT

The history of the education of women from prehistory through the 1960s reveals constant themes. In every period, obstacles reflecting the prevalent social attitudes were placed in the paths of women seeking education. Economic conditions directly affected the status and scope of women's education, although certain disciplines such as religion and letters were consistently considered appropriate. Religion, playing both a positive and negative role, was also closely associated with women's education. Education for the purpose of training good wives and mothers began in ancient Greece. Reading and writing were incorporated into their education in the Christian Era so that women could read the scriptures. Through the Reformation, the main objectives of women's education remained to mold good, pious homemakers. In the 18th century, a shortage of teachers and nurses led to the opening of these fields of education for women. The 20th century has been characterized by a conflict between work and education. During the Depression, women were discouraged from teacher education because of the job shortage. In the 1940s, women left school to help the war effort, returning in large numbers in the 1950s. Recently, women have combined their goals in professional training. A seven-page bibliography is included. (LP)

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HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

A Paper presented to the preconference Women in Alaskan Community Colleges

at

Alaska's Fourth Statewide Conference of the University of Alaska Community Colleges, Rural Education, Extension and Anchorage Community College

May 15, 1983

Fairbanks, Alaska

by

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HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

New perspectives give birth to new historical ages. Humankind has had many dramatic revolutions of understanding, has taken great leaps, and has experienced sudden liberation from old limits. We discovered the use of fire and the wheel, language and writing. We found that the earth only seems flat, the sun only seems to circle the earth, and matter only seems solid. We learned to communicate, fly, explore.

Distinctly new ways of thinking abounded, of course, through history. Early in our pre-history the problems of the continuation of the race were faced and solved by a simple division of labor between men and women. This division was employed to assure care for the young while food was being gathered for the group. Through the ages men have been defined as providers for the family or clan while women have been defined as caretakers and nurturers. As technological advances made the division of labor less necessary, attitudes toward it did not always follow. Even though activities necessary to carry out both functions have consistantly changed, history has generally been recorded by men with an emphasis on their role. Because women's concerns are not recorded in traditional history textbooks, the information must be sought from other materials. Records in the forms of essays, letters, and exerpts from authors of general works do exist. Since these records are often intermittent and of inconsistent detail, following the themes through the ages is difficult. At times, documents concerning issues important to women that come to the attention of decision makers greatly altered their attitudes. In these cases, changec occurred. Education, the lack of it, or the unequalness of it for women has been one of these issues.

This paper is presented as an initial attempt to synthasize the literature located to date, on the education of women. It is hoped that further research will complete the picture.

From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, Americans generally hold that education is the birthright of all individuals, irrespective of creed, color, family income, status or sex. Those of us who lived through the 1960's know that this view has not, until recently, been prevelent. As we examine the historical periods, however, we will see that there have always been a few leaders who have advanced the cause of educating girls and women.

Progress was slow, frustrating and uneven. To demonstrate this, events will be presented in chronological order. Themes that appear throughout the chronology area:

First, in each period, obstacles were placed in the paths of women desiring an education. Specific obstacles are indicative of the dominate socio-economic views of the day, but they were always present.

Another recurrent theme is that the education of women and religion were often closely connected. Religion played both positive and negative roles.

Third, changes in male and female attitudes toward the concept of an educated woman took place during each period. At each stage

someone would declare anew that women could not wait for the world to turn -- for times to change that they might change with them. Over and over it had to be shown that men's advantages had to do with superior education, not superior intellect. Most often women found that they must take steps to control their own future.

Next, changes in any one society or in any one culture ultimately affect other cultures. Economic trade routes were used for social idea exchange as well as trade. These exchanges didn't necessarily take place as quickly or weren't as well documented as commerce, but they did exist.

Finally, disciplines in which it was considered appropriate for women to be educated have been relatively consistent throughout history. Domestic concerns (running a good home for men and children) have always been uppermost.

Others are religion, letters, teaching and nursing. These areas of study were usually acceptable only if women did not seek leadership posts such as the clergy or administration. When economic conditions were such that men found it difficult to find jobs doing other, more lucrative things, even these areas were closed to women.

PREHISTORY

Anthropologists have uncovered evidence that prior to recorded history women were responsible for the discovery and development of agriculture. They took this step because men, who were the hunters, could not bring home enough food for the group. When they did, it was periodic, leading to a feast or faminine style of living. Cultivating, then gathering, then preserving plants and domesticated animal food was taught to younger women in much the same way as hunting was taught to young men. Ceremonies were developed to celebrate key times in producing this important food source, just as there were hunting feasts.

ANCIENT HISTORY

The recurring debate about women's ability to absorb ideas begins in Ancient Greece. Plato, in 400 B.C., attributes the inferior reasoning power of females not to a lack of innate ability, but to an inadequate education. He felt women were morally and intellectually equal to men. Aristotle, Plato's student argued that "the male rules the female and she should not be educated."

Greek curriculums suggested for women were practical and social. While the men were to learn the arts of peace and war, women were to learn for the purpose of domestic efficiency. Because of their differing outlooks on life, the curriculum was different in the two major Greek states of Athens and Sparta. In Athens, wives were kept in specific rooms in the house, out of sight, to raise the children. Mistresses, on the other hand, were taught

literature, philosophy, and politics so that they could be interesting informed companions. In Sparta, women were taught many of the same sports as men and participated in public athletic contests. Emphasis was placed on physical fitness, but women also contributed to family and political discussions. In both cases, however, the underlying reason for educating women was to make them good mothers.

The early Hebrews emphasized making women junior partners in the family, however, domestic skills were still important for them.

EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA

During the early Christian era Saul of Tarsis (later called Paul) sent letters to the early Christian churches. References were made to women in his letters, indicating the probability that they would be reading them and profiting from their instruction.

St. Jerome, in this period, wrote to some of his wealthy parishioners in Rome concerning the education of their daughters. Emphasis for the girls was to be placed on learning to read and write, to make fine wool and to undertake the domestic chores of a noblewoman. They were not even to hear, much less learn to play, musical instruments. They were to learn the scriptures, but to be kept unaware of all worldly concerns and to associate only with their own sex.

It is presumed that the large slave class in this or any other era was not educated at all, but trained to do the specific tasks assigned.

MIDDLE AGES

The Dominate theme in the writings of educated people, in Christian countries during the middle ages, was how to enter heaven. The uneducated masses learned how to do this by attending church. The paintings, sculpture, and architecture were teaching tools. Secular education was deemphasized.

Education of women was reserved for daughters of the nobility. It generally took place in the nunneries with a curriculum of Latin, Greek and intricate needlework. Some of Europe's Kings established court schools for women. These were usually attended by the Queen, her ladies and the children of noblemen at the court. Women at court were usually kept apart from men and had leisure time to learn. As in the nunneries, religion was emphasized, with Latin, Greek, and needlework included.

It was in these courts that the first records of who married whom in royal circles was kept as part of the first recorded "histories" in Europe. These records indicate the growing use of women to unite political entities.

The first Universities and Medical Schools were established during this period, but women were not admitted.

RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

The Renaissance and Reformation has as its dominate educational theme the revival of classical learning in Europe. Political changes affected the control

of the church over society. As the kings and secular landlords became more powerful, the church lost much of its influence on education. As shipping became important, cities became sprawling trade centers, not just walled forts. Thus a large group of middle class merchants vital to socio-economic survival was created. They ran the cities while landlords controlled the countryside. Kings had more difficulty holding their territory.

A significant number of women shared business responsibilities with their merchant husbands. Since the business world was rapidly changing, they were trained, as were their husbands, through on-the-job training.

Girls of the European courts still received a classical education combined with what was now called domestic science. The assumption was that this type of "scientific" education would enhance cooking and nursing skills.

There was widespread closing of the nunneries as church land was taken into secular hands. The result was that not only was the land lost to the church, but the classical educational opportunities of women who did not live at court was substantially diminished.

The rising sense of nationalism in Europe affected education for boys, but it had a dramatic effect on the education of women especially in England. Special schools for girls were established for the first time.

Even though girls were attending schools, rather than learning at home, advances were not necessarily made in the curriculum. The goal was still to create a well read but not scholarly woman. They were to be good

housewives and managers of their husband's homes. Religious education was inseparable from intellectual learning and women were to demonstrate a sound religious character.

Seminaries for women who wanted to become teachers appeared late in this period. One of the operators of such a seminary wrote, "Women are inferior to men because of the lack of education, not a difference in nature. Women's schools should be comparable to men's schools."

An outline of details for the establishment of a women's college was prepared by Daniel Defoe in 1697.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Religious leaders in the early American Colonies, such as Cotton Mather, wrote about the obligation families had to educate children and women. Girls were to be taught because they were in turn to be teachers of the young.

The Colonists brought with them the European practice of apprenticing children and young adults from one family to another for the purposes of learning a trade. The same type of training was given to indentured servants who worked to pay for their boat passage to the new world. A specified number of years of work would be exchanged for the passage money. Often the opportunity to learn a trade was an added benefit.

Evening schools and summer schools were established in the coastal cities so that these apprentices could learn to read and write. As time went on, many of these schools greatly expanded their curriculum to include accounting, foreign languages, mathematics, and other subjects considered useful to employers. Attendance at the evening school or summer school was made a part of the contract between the apprentice and the master. These schools were open to young women as well as young men.

An interesting informal educational process was taking place in Europe during the later part of the eighteenth century. The practice of being hostess to daily gatherings of prominent male intellectuals engaged in scholarly discussions gave women great insight into current learning. Such gatherings were called salons in France and part of the Blue Stocking Movement in England.

During this period, Europe experienced a shortage of teachers and nurses. Women were encouraged to enter seminaries to become trained in these professions. Universal acceptance of such training for women, however, was not to be. Rousseau, a proponent of natural learning for boys was a famous dissenter. He believed that men and women differed psychologically and, therefore, needed different educations. Education of women was for the purpose of training them to oblige men, to do their service, to gain their love and esteem, to rear them when they are young, to attend to them when they are grown up, to console them and to sooth their pains and often their life with every kind of banishment. This attitude affected the education of women for years to come.

All other professions excluded women from any kind of formal training. In the Colonies, however, where no medical schools and few doctors existed until the end of the century, women practiced medicine. They learned what they needed to know by reading European books on the subject and from other women. Many of their struggles are recorded in Plantation records. As medical schools were established women were excluded and men took over the practice of medicine.

Feminists in Glouster, Massachusetts echoed the theme stated previously, that men's presumed superiority was due to their superior education, not to their intellectual inheritance. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated a system of national co-education and promised it with leaflets. The first school established specifically for women, who had been unable to attend when they were younger, was established in England in 1792.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, private female seminaries were established in the United States and Europe. They provided expanded opportunities for women by granting degrees enabling them to enter all the professions. Normal schools were established that improved the training of teachers.

Most women, however, either did not attend school at all as adults or when they did it was usually a "finishing school" open for only a few months. In

these schools, they were trained in social skills with the goal of making them fit to be introduced into the marriage market.

Two groups of women, who wished to enter very different lines of work denied to them because of their sex, joined together for their mutual benefit. Those who wanted to enter the professions, mostly medicine, and those who wanted to take part in union sponsored training for blue collar jobs found they often had the same problems and goals. This cooperation between middle class women and "factory girls" was considered strange by men, but it was effective in creating change. An exception was that immigrant women and girls were not easily brought into the group. They would regularly quit English classes and adult schools if they could get a job or work extra hours.

The education of former slave girls and women in the South during the Reconstruction Era was not officially different from that of boys. Evidence exists, however, that girls attended more regularly than boys and as a result learned literacy skills faster.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

During the twentieth century seeing women in U.S. colleges was no longer unusual. At the beginning of the century, women comprised 25% of the undergraduates, 26% of the graduate students and 30% of the professional students. By 1920, 15% of the doctoral students were women. There were 128 women's colleges by the beginning of the century.

The first labor union to establish a separate educational department for women was the Ladies Garment Workers.

Vocational education for women expanded rapidly during the intense industrialization of the country, especially in the area of office work. Women were systematically convinced that an opportunity to work at a "clean" job was an adequate trade off for low pay. They were recruited in large numbers, and this female ghetto exists even today.

Home Economics became a recognized vocational education training program. It began as a complement to the agricultural cooperative extension programs at land grant universities. Teaching was done using the same informal methods. Women now needed to be taught how to preserve and manage the excess products grown on the farms. They also learned how to produce additional food and clothing for the family.

In the 1930's the psychologist Thorndike published a paper that recognized formally, for the first time, that learning did not stop at the completion of adolescence. Adults continued to learn and develop throughout life. This was the beginning of the Adult Education Movement and set the stage for women to return to school after their traditional child bearing years.

During the depression, when it was thought men deserved jobs because they had families, school boards, state governments and male teachers exerted pressure to keep women out of teaching. The requirements for teacher training were increased and women were encouraged to forego it and thus the jobs, in favor of men.

By the 1940's many colleges were advising women to take classes based on the new theory of psychology put forward by Freud. The focus was on training women to help their husbands move up the career ladder. We do not know how much this curriculum contributed to the decline in women's college enrollments in the early forties, but it probably had more to do with the number of women working in the factories during the second world war. After the war, enrollment of women increased again. Often they now had clear vocational aims in mind. A new group made up of older women and lower class women began attending colleges. Their new found independence led them to desire employment that not only paid more, but required a college education.

The women's movement was instrumental in encouraging women to seek careers, and therefore training, in upper management of business, government and social agencies. Wmen were also encouraged to actively seek training for the high paying, traditionally male, "dirty," jobs. Seekers of blue collar jobs often had greater difficulty getting into and graduating from the union sponsored apprenticeship schools than white collar women have had getting into management. Legislation that helped in these efforts was passed and enforced the first time.

Post 1970 is not considered history.

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